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AUTHOR Bates, Clif
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ABSTRACT

Based on a literature review and the 20 years experience of an Alaskan teacher and administrator, some recommendations are proposed to improve education in rural Alaska school districts with Alaska Native students, particularly Yup'ik Eskimos. Currently such school districts have an education system similar to that found throughout the United States and do not take into account the Native culture and heritage. Social and educational indicators show that rural Alaska schools are often not graduating individuals with adequate skills and attitudes. While there is no single definition of what constitutes success, a goal is suggested for rural schools: to graduate students who are confident and capable individuals, whether living in the traditional culture or the global society. To work toward this goal, recommendations are offered in the areas of oral language, intellectual strengths, instruction, and educator training. Eskimo children live in a world without print where the culture emphasizes learning through observation rather than verbal explanations. To provide a foundation for reading and writing, schools must emphasize oral language development for Native students in the early grades. Schools should build on the strengths that Eskimo children consistently demonstrate: superior perceptual skills and spatial ability. Instruction could be improved by matching student learning styles and by moving to an ungraded elementary program. Finally, teachers must receive special training to understand the situation and meet student needs in rural Alaska schools. Contains 24 references. (SV)

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Alaska Native Education
Some Recommendations from This Corner

Clif Bates
P.O. Box 106
Aniak, Alaska 99557
June 1997

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Alaska Native Education
Some Recommendations from This Corner

Based on a variety of educational research and on my nearly twenty years experience as a teacher and administrator in Alaska, I would like to propose some recommendations as to how the educational system can be improved in rural Alaska school districts with Alaska native students, particularly Yup'ik. The current situation in such school districts is an education system that is basically the same model that exists in most school districts throughout the United States. What Hickel wrote in 1977 is still true today, that "present policy makers seem to desire a carbon copy of the standard, white middle-class curriculum rather than taking into account the native culture and heritage" (p. 404).

This education model has been superimposed over these aboriginal people with very few adaptations having been made. There have been superficial efforts, but they have not significantly improved the quality of Bush education and the "success" of the Yup'ik or Alaska native student. By taking into consideration native culture and heritage, I am not referring to efforts such as cultural heritage classes, native crafts or even native language teaching that occur during the school day.

Four very realistic recommendations are offered that would not

require dismantling the existing model, but would alter it in ways to more appropriately meet the needs of these students. There is no intent here to address sociological, economical, or issues other than specifically educational concerns. No panacea is offered, merely some suggestions that would likely result in improvements. This is not an exhaustive, all-inclusive list by any means. In no way is this a criticism of the native culture or cultural traits. It is a matter of the school system adapting to meet the needs of these students, and not forcing these students to fit an established mold. No finger is being pointed at the native child, it is pointed directly at the educational system.

A Definition of Success

The appropriateness and success of our education system nation-wide is certainly in question. That is a macro issue and not one this paper intends to address. The concern here is what are some ways we can improve the current educational situation in the many villages throughout rural Alaska which have high Alaska native populations.

I have spent the last twenty years in Alaska as an educator, the majority of the time in rural Alaska native school districts with Yup'ik students. There have been some changes, mainly in the bilingual education,

but no significant alterations in the basic approach to schooling. If the education system keeps doing what it is doing, it will keep getting what it has been getting. The general consensus that I am able to determine is that there is not a great deal of contentment over what we are getting from our rural schools.

There are several indications that show we are too often not graduating individuals with adequate skills and attitudes: standardized test scores (considering all their limitations), suicide rate, unemployment rate, alcoholism and alcohol related crimes, degree of college success, drop out rates, etc. all demonstrate a reason to be concerned and to consider making some alterations in the schools.

Many students have done quite well and some improvements in student achievement have taken place over the years. This may or not be a result of the efforts of the school system. The more westernized a student is, the more apt that student is to do better in the western school system. This improvement can be because of or in spite of what goes on in the classroom.

There is no single definition of what constitutes success in a high school graduate anywhere in the United States. Village schools have their own unique set of barriers, limitations, and influences. Based on the

mission statement composed by Kuspuk School District educators, school board members, parents, and community members, I suggest the following goal for rural school districts to strive: to graduate students who are confident and capable individuals whether living in the traditional culture or the global society. A graduate would possess academic and technological skills and the ability to communicate effectively in the dominant society. The graduates would have pride in themselves and positive self esteem. In 1973 Collier proposed that education should "provide an opportunity for the Eskimo to excel successfully in the modern world as an Eskimo" (p. 125).

Educators must go beyond making just superficial changes to better meet the needs of these students and be more successful in their mission. My recommendations relate to four main areas: oral language, intellectual strengths, instruction, and educator training. Communication skills and self esteem of students are the two overriding concerns.

Recommendations

Oral Language Foundation

The western education system is one that honors verbal ability.

"Verbal ability has long been regarded as the best single predictor of academic success" (Stodolsky and Lesser, 1967, p. 33). As Ernest Boyer writes, "language is the center piece of learning. It's not just another subject but the means by which all subjects are perceived". There is ample evidence that verbal ability is the weakest area for many of our Alaska native students. Various studies show that Eskimos are low in abstract verbal abilities (Lipinski 1990, More 1984, Kleinfeld 1978, Bock and Feldman 1970). Brown (1991) explains that "native students rank far below norms in reading, language arts, and language arts related subjects." As Bock and Feldman found, Eskimo children scored significantly below the norms on all test items in the English vocabulary tests. Streiff's study (1980) showed that the nearly 3,000 Eskimo children of western Alaska are almost three grade levels below their ages in reading comprehension.

I want to emphasize as Olsen wrote in 1971, "verbal deficiencies of the culturally different are not related to low intelligence or emotional immaturity" (p. 68). Salisbury echoes this in writing "Eskimos' communication problems stem from conflicting cross-cultural values, not from any lack of intelligence" (1969. p. 27). The Eskimos are of a culture and environment where there is little experience with the purpose of

literacy and little exposure to reading and writing behavior, linguistic concepts or language usage. The education system needs to take this into consideration.

Rural native students do not live in a world of print. There are few signs, billboards or written communication in village life. There often are no books in the homes and parents do not often model reading and writing behavior. Along with this is the cultural trait of emphasizing learning via observation, not by verbal explanations. As Collier points out "the information procedure amongst the Eskimos was terse in verbal explanation and highly non-verbal in demonstration." Florey (1986) shares findings that "the learning and behavorial characteristics of Native Americans as being different than the predominate culture in that they have a reliance on non-verbal communication and use undetailed verbal accounts". It is evident that the Eskimos' situation clearly coincides with the results of research that attempts to explain the causes of reading disabilities and poor "school language" skills.

From a home and village environment that does not emphasize reading and writing behavior and a culture that is strong on learning by observation and non-verbal communication, an Eskimo student enters the school environment, a language-saturated institution. Short concrete

verbal exchanges with friends and family are now replaced with the "school language" of abstractions, concepts and long verbal explanations in the classroom, an unfamiliar world full of print and talk. Without making adaptations for these students, our schools follow the standard school model. Before these students develop an adequate foundation of listening and speaking skills of this school language, we try to teach them to read and write.

Moore (1976) states that "oral language development is the single most important factor in determining readiness for reading." Buckley (1993, p. 7) explains that "a child's mastery of oral language determines his/her future mastery of reading and writing." Simpson-Tyson (1977 and 1978) reports that "the study of oral language of Native American children indicates that many are not proficient enough in English to learn to read." It is not likely that a successful reading and writing program can be built on an inadequate base of oral language.

Educators have a legitimate reason to consider making an adaptation to our school model. Our schools in general tend to give listening and speaking skill development a very limited amount of attention. In our rural schools evidence shows us that we must emphasize oral language development in our Alaska native students. We have to ensure that an

adequate foundation of listening and speaking skills in the school language is established before we ask these children to read and write. There are adequate, exemplary resources available to help in teaching these skills. Oral language development needs to be a definite strand that runs through the K-12 curriculum, but it must particularly be a large part of the first five years of schooling. We need to make an adjustment and stop trying to teach native children to read and write before they are cognitively ready, before they have adequate listening and speaking skills in this setting. If we do not do make this change, students will continue experiencing cognitive confusion at the integration level resulting in reading disabilities.

In Bognar's research report (1981), he relates self-criticism and poor self-concept of Indians and Eskimos to reading ability. It is no wonder that students with problems in the area of verbal ability, reading and writing, develop poor self-esteem by attending a school system that, from the very beginning, marks success by proficiency in these skills.

Intellectual Strengths

It is ironic that the converse is true: a school system that allows success and positively rewards students with strength in communication

skills is the same system that often does not provide the opportunity for Alaska native students to demonstrate the special strengths they possess. More (1984) found, "Eskimos are significantly higher in perceptual skills, visuospatial abilities and imaginal decoding than other students." Kleinfeld (1973), Bock and Feldman, and Kaulbeck (1984) support this as well, and I have verified these findings with school pyschologists who have tested hundreds of Eskimo students on the Yukon-Kuskokwim and mid-Kuskokwim over the last several years. Kleinfeld goes as far as suggesting that Eskimos have a genetic superiority when it comes to perceptual skills and spatial ability. Florey also describes the "superior visual discrimination and fine motor skills of native Americans". The abilities of Eskimos to envision the workings of complex machinery and make repairs are legendary.

There is sufficient evidence to ensure that the educational system teaches students to demonstrate special skills they possess. We cannot just concentrate on their area of weakness and ignore the talents they have which are exceptional.

Spatial ability and perceptual skills can be included in the curriculum in a variety of ways: mapping, geometry, mechanics, drawing, carving, and model building are some examples. This cannot help but assist

in developing positive self-esteem and a more favorable attitude toward school in students who are experiencing negative rewards in an academic verbal world. We cannot continue concentrating on the weaknesses of these students, expecting them to fit into this model and, at the same time ignore their unique strengths.

Instruction

The mode of instruction is also reflective of the standard school model. It is often textbook driven and based on grade level concerns. Due to problems many of the native students have in communication skills, they often do not fit the grade-level "box". Teachers often look at retention, Title I, or special education services to help these students obtain certain grade-level achievement. Even in a very small remote village school where there might be five students in grades K-6, we still find each student labeled according to a grade level.

There is enough evidence provided by researchers to consider drastically altering the standard mode of instruction in classrooms of Alaska native students. We most often find students asked to gleen information and concepts from texts that many students cannot comprehend. The emphasis is on the written word and verbal explanations

by the teacher.

This manner of schooling is not congruent with predominate Alaska native learning style. The findings of Wauters (1984) show a significant difference between the learning styles of Alaska natives and non-natives." This difference in learning style of Alaska natives is expressed by Swisher, "observation, demonstration, and cooperation are essential steps in learning... and these cultural styles of learning do not match the learning environment of the typical classroom" (1989 and 1991). Kaulback reviews the literature about learning styles and explains that native children learn best from visual stimulation.

Stairs, (1994) in a study of native American students, challenges the Western cultural package of standard literary practice, schooling and abstract thought." Tharp and Yamauchi (1994) reinforce this belief in the diffrences between native learning and traditional western schooling. They point out the differences, for example, in conversational wait time for native and non-natives and the emphasis on visual/holistic approach by native students. They describe the "ideal Native American learning activity to be in the social context of small student-directed units engaged in a joint production activity that contextualizes formal knowledge in the immediate experience and concerns of the learners".

Alterations in this area of instruction relate to two main areas. The first change would be ensuring that the mode of instruction is congruent with the learning style of the students and not solely based on the standard literary practices of the Western classroom which largely relies on texts and verbal explanations. The second recommendation is to move to an ungraded K-8 educational program.

If we would address where the child is developmentally instead of the current overconcern for grade level, we could better meet the student's needs. British Columbia's non-graded school system would be a model to investigate. There are other schools around the country designed in this fashion that can be looked at for ideas. In the multigraded small village schools it is particularly valuable to look at each student in terms of where that child is developmentally. Since language is the key to school success and that is the area many of our students have difficulties, we could approach it in the way that we have nine years to work with these students to develop their language skills, knowledge base, and problem solving abilities. Not all students need to be doing certain things by grade two or by grade six for example.

Educators

Another irony is educators who we predict would be a conduit for change, often are the main obstacle. Teachers are hired who are products of the existing K-12 system and have been schooled using and preparing for this model in teacher education classes. It is very difficult to break that paradigm. They continue to teach in the manner they have been taught. Often a teacher attempts to work with students, and when after repeated efforts, the learner does not demonstrate learning, the teacher tends to point the finger at the child. The teacher may think there must be something wrong with these students, instead of considering there is likely something wrong with his/her methodolgy.

It is not a matter of trying to make a child fit into a grade level program. It is a matter of adjusting the curriculum and teaching methods and adapting materials to meet the needs of each child in the classroom. We need village teachers who understand this concept and can teach accordingly. Teachers are needed who know how to meet the needs of each student in a classroom with a wide range of abilities. And we need teachers who are able to make a paradigm shift and step out of the traditional western model and teach in ways these students learn best. Colleges of education, for the most part, are not training teacher

candidates in these attributes, skills, and approaches.

This issue of effective teachers of Alaska native students is a huge topic and deserving of a paper unto itself. And there are exceptional teachers who are working quietly in far away classrooms who have so much to offer not only students but other teachers. My main concern here is that we do not at all prepare teachers to the degree they need to be prepared to be successful educators in these village schools with Alaska native students. It takes much more than the State requiring a couple generic classes in cross-cultural education to prepare an individual for the very complex array of forces and issues: cultural, political, economical, social, environmental, and educational that a teacher will face in a village. It is a fluid jigsaw puzzle and there are no easy solutions to problems and difficulties that a teacher will encounter.

If Alaska State Department of Education understands the needs and the situation in rural schools, it could implement a teacher training program that is designed by experienced effective teachers, village people, school board members, students, and administrators. This training program must be designed for particular areas in Alaska. The situation in Chuathbaluk on the mid-Kuskokwim is quite different than the situation in Angoon in Southeast Alaska.

In Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to set forth some recommendations for altering what goes on in our schools in rural Alaska. The scope of it does not intend to include such things as methodolgy in teaching listening and speaking skills or teaching methods that are appropriate for native learning styles. I am suggesting that there is enough evidence to consider ensuring a definite strong emphasis on oral language development taking place throughout the K-12 program, but it is crucial to incorporate this in the first five years of school. We must allow these students access to success and not just concentrate on their area of weakness and ignore there unique strengths. Instruction must move away from mainly being based on texts and verbal explanations and must take into consideration the manner in which these students learn best. We need to consider a K-8 ungraded program. Educators need to be trained and prepared more than by a token gesture. It does not need to be a sink or swim, survive or leave type of situation when districts hire individuals and place them in a village school.

From the extremes of the missionary schools and the inflexibleness of the BIA schools to the current situation, the education system in rural

schools in Alaska has been the same basic model found throughout the United States. It is a school system which honors verbal ability which happens to be many of these students' weakest area. We have a school system which does not provide adequate opportunity for these students to demonstrate their strengths. We have State legislators with no understanding of the complexity of the situation who compare how well the standard school system model works in the Bush with how well it works in urban areas.

There is a much larger core of educators with a better understanding of the situation in rural Alaska than there was just a decade ago. In the last dozen years an abundance of educators with master and doctorate degrees in cross-cultural education have surfaced around Alaska. A great deal has been written about education and the Alaska native. Resources are no longer on graduate library shelves just gathering dust. Resources on this subject are quite abundant; now they are sometimes gathering dust in places that are at least physically closer to the classroom.

But when it all comes down to it, there is still this western education system that has been superimposed over our rural Alaskan native communities with really very few adaptations. The paradigm remains the same. There have been improvements, but they may have been

accomplished despite the system as these students naturally become more westernized.

It is important for rural Alaskan educators to realize that realistically we must work within the existing paradigm. It is difficult enough making changes within this model let alone trying to make a radical shift to a totally new system. The problems that beset the entire education system and that all youth everywhere must face in the rapidly changing times must be put in perspective. What we can do, what is in our power, is to make appropriate alterations in this model. From this corner, four possible changes are recommended for consideration.

END

Clif Bates
P.O. Box 106
Aniak, Alaska 99557

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